

Post-Suburban Sydney: Community Between Global Commodity and Local Autonomy

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Prologue

To find a post-suburban future for Sydney seems like a trivial challenge, at first glance. This young and expanding region is still in frontier mood. It seems to only await maturing, intensification, a stronger sense of cultural self, higher density, greater diversity; more integration; the cultural evolution into a world city: in short, an Antipodean version of London, New York, or Tokyo.

But looked at closely, this isn't quite the core of the barriers to change. These other cities, too, struggle with severe growth disorders at their fringes. And in many ways Sydney is not like any of these cities. Like some Asian and North American metropolitan regions young Sydney is exploding into an enormous, quasi-urban configuration driven by powerful forces and flows, at a much faster rate than the maturing of cities requires: growing healthy urban cores and both evolve and sustain a viable planning culture. The establishment of greater local autonomy is a means of taking responsibility for local action, and a genuine driver of community and economic development. It offers the most promising remedy to many challenges associated with the phenomenon Sydney today.

A post-suburban Sydney depends on practical models of resource autonomy: in personal livelihood, culture, community, biodiversity, water, waste and energy resources. Organisational and regulatory reform aimed at these domains will bring about more diverse communities, emerging from the hastily assembled developments of yesterday: whether to produce first homes of migrants, aspiring dream chalets, or medium-density residential agglomerations - those massive personal investment objects and consumption 'machines in the garden.' All of these phenomena are integral to what we call suburbs today.

In principle, suburban Sydney is capable of bringing forth vibrant town centres and sustaining a far richer culture of local and cosmopolitan engagement. Some of most promising initiatives in this last decade are listed towards the end of this paper. But these examples are still rather few and exceptional: rare rays of hope. This will remain so until Sydney's leadership and communities manage to overcome six barriers to change on the road to post-suburbia: (a) the fossilised planning culture of myopic fixation on physical assets and property development; (b) standardised local environmental planning processes and development control plans, and approval routines blind to community outcomes; (c) a stubborn reluctance of embracing comprehensive strategies of moving into a post-fossil era; (d) a resistance to, or even fear of, high-quality public transport and

the idea of accessibility in general; (e) an out-of-control road building and traffic management regime that is still very much antagonistic towards people on foot and bicycles; and (f) the near-total absence of meaningful social, cultural and community development ideas, objectives and strategies in physical planning.

I Suburban Sydney as Middle Earth

Culturally, psychologically and morphologically, metropolitan Sydney is a remarkable setting. Enormously complex socially and ecologically, it is also strikingly unevolved and simple in its built environment. Sydney *is* a suburb. Largely a two-dimensional field, it is stretched between scattered urban nodes, and has spread wide and thin over these past seven generations, the proverbial oil slick on a pristine pond. Additive subdivisions have oozed into and across the vast colonial estates that had carved up Aboriginal lands, slicing them into fields, pastures and mines, industrial estates, rail tracks and roads. Early Slick City was shaped by generously bankrolled real-estate markets, cheap coal and seemingly egalitarian social settlement policies. But it has also been crafted with a sharp eye for shoring up vast property development, construction, automobile distribution and maintenance industries, including massive and lucrative motor fuel distribution networks. But like other metropolitan centres in the world, from Beijing to Las Vegas, recent Sydney, late Slick City, has begun to bloat dangerously in the past 25 years, with the mathematical force of exponential growth.

Its underlying resource base is a key reason for this: despite Sydney's image as a service centre and information hub, New South Wales's leading industry and export domain lies in minerals, with coal leading by far. To its denizens, Sydney is Middle Earth, but one that is founded on a dark, coal empire, lubricated by underpriced petroleum. more than 90% of Sydney electricity is coal incineration based; and virtually all transport energy is presently petroleum or coal derived (Droege, 2007).

Sydney is a frontiers town of moving boundaries, an urban universe expanding at the edges while entropy increases throughout the system. It is an efficient consumer farm, romantically set in a mythical landscape nestled among great river system, the harbour-to-die-for, and a blue mountain range. Middle Earth is one of the world's largest metropolitan areas when measured in geographic size, but also one of the least dense of the larger centres of the world. A former Olympic city, it still breaks most world records - in urban fresh water usage, petroleum-based energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, when calculated per capita. Where retail drives new town centres, suburbs become the real shopping malls. Suburbia has mutated, from placeless exurb and choice-deprived consumption machine to the living aisles in the global lifestyle section of an open-air mega mall. It has obliterated much of *natural and traditional Sydney* with the rubber stamp of place stereotypes a la *Home World* (homeworld.com.au) – and its props for the Sydney version of the Truman Show.

Sydney is also London's suburb, and that of New York and Tokyo – and more recently, Beijing. The suburban condition appears to be embedded in its genes. This is increasingly a global feature: virtually all of the world's population increase is urban – and by definition this means *suburban*. The contemporary urban condition *is* to be suburban. How do we best conceptualise the suburb as an entity in itself – the global phenomenon

of a primary periphery, where the edge becomes the centre? The word *suburb* is a misnomer when describing Middle Earth, or what Peter Rowe in the early 90s has reframed as the *middle landscape* in the United States, a place between 'city' and 'countryside.' (Rowe, 1991) Rowe had borrowed the term from the Civil War expression for this mythical in-between terrain that had inspired writers like Twain, Melville, Whitman and Hawthorne (Rowe, 1991; Marx, 1967). Yet the quasi-rural analogy is only superficially useful: while the modern, polynucleic suburban space has certain features that are reminiscent of Walter Christaller's central place theory, formed around Bavarian towns and villages in the 1930s (Christaller, 1933), its underlying dynamics are global, not regional in nature.

The suburban condition - or affliction - has emerged as the preferred form of late capitalist urbanism, the globalised city, the city as networked information phenomenon (Droege, 1997). This is an at once individuating and homogenising space of imagery, articulated around real estate, retail and employment markets. The suburb of the 21st century promises to resemble the suburb of the 20th only in vaguely visual-configurational terms – it is visualised not so much as home but as globalised lifestyle aspiration – and networked spatially into a Great Urban Wash. But it is also, in a very deep sense, techno-society manifest: the fossil fuel age's answer to city form, the 20th century's true urban legacy.

But suburbia is evolving. A new future is emerging, a greener, more community-minded and inclusive direction appears to beckon. The suburban realm shows signs of a more hopeful, post-global, post-fossil, self-reliant urban network – where development land is reconciled with historical claims, cultural places and landscapes, active open space use for new forms of agriculture - and the vibrant uncertainties of diversity enacted.

II The City of Four Flows

Where the village was a *place* – the contemporary suburban realm is about *flow*, in the sense of Manuel Castells' seminal distinctions (Castells, 2000). Here, post-modern place replicas are manufactured. Even the picturesque US suburbs of the 19th and early 20th century were stage sets in the wider flow of ideas and lifestyle aspirations set in motion by the new age of the *Four Flows*. Indeed, the suburb – and Sydney as suburb - expresses these four great contemporary flows. One is the flow of **information**, in digital form in the communication networks that have permeated and dissolved traditional cities into diffuse, hybrid realms of reality and virtuality: both wireless and conduit-bound. But the information flow dimension has also long been expressed in the mass media realms of television and print – and the realities and desires their writers help to imbue and reinforce. Another is the ubiquitous flow of **mobility** – of people, households and jobs within and between metropolitan fields, and globally; and of modes of transport, notably the automobile, and, increasingly, air travel. But the most fundamental and ubiquitous flow the suburbs are captive to and expressive of are the global chains of fossil **energy**, in this petroleum age in which contemporary buildings, facilities and infrastructures are founded on a pervasive yet ultimately self-destructive industrial paradigm, the logic of the fossil fuel economy. And the final, most powerful and mythical of all flows is that of **money** – it links all aspects of the region and the city to the national and global economy, enabling, no, determining its aspirations, its information, mobility and energy flow. This

most fundamental flow very much limits the extent and rate to which sustainable development can be achieved, since income, wealth and money in the bank represent a stake in, or entitlement to the global flows of goods and services – the vast majority of which are produced in unsustainable ways, given the global economy's fossil nature (*85% of global commercial energy supply is fossil fuel based; and 75% of this is dedicated to cities within countries of the OECD, ie their construction, management and mobility*).

Contrary to popular belief, cities in general, and *suburb Sydney* in particular, are very much threatened in being driven by these forces, and not in control of these. The four flows now shift and evolve; they have their own laws. No matter whether one looks at the *problem suburbia* in terms of any of these flows, or from a cultural, resource, or community development view point: virtually all serious response mechanisms discussed today involve one or the other model of regional and sub-regional autonomy in a struggle to stem the relentless commodification or commercialisation of people, relationships, traditions, homes, streets and communities themselves.

Now, how on earth did we get here?

III Fossil city, Faustian fortress

Our time has been declared an age of cities. Urban centres have been heralded as the very engines of the global economy. They have been described glowingly as the drivers of national prosperity and home of the *classes* leading in creativity and innovation (Florida, 2002; Castells, 2000; Hall 1998; Sassen, 1994, 1991; Mazza, 1988; Jacobs, 1985; Hall, 1977; Friedman and Wulff, 1976).

These ideas have fuelled a worldwide city marketing frenzy throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, surprisingly, this body of work has offered no insight into the most basic yet also most fragile of all urban growth drivers: cheap fossil fuels and a system of development rewards that very much prefers quantity above quality. It is as if the wondrous dreams about urban salvation through comparative advantage has kept thinkers from facing the sobering reality that the urbanised world is mushrooming on the rich Petri dish of only temporarily plentiful petroleum nutrients.

Both the Modern ideal and the post-modern critique of cities in the era of a global urbanisation wave are drifting blindly in the vast ocean of wasteful abundance that has been engendered by the empowering regime of petroleum and, in other countries today, and possibly in Sydney tomorrow, also uranium. The amplifying force of these new power facilitators made possible the ubiquitous and mechanised mobilisation and rapid acceleration in the exploitation of natural resources, and has fed the dominant dogma of massive and conspicuous consumption as the global religion of progress (Sloterdijk, 2005). The modern suburb is one of the central pillars and stage sets of this unfolding drama.

Fossil City's rapid rise and spread around the globe is a remarkable, historical phenomenon in this paradoxical age of abundance-in-scarcity. Since and throughout the 19th and 20th centuries cities - and the culture they manufactured - have become creatures and features of the rising, wider combustion economy. London exploded in size when rapidly evolving coal-based steam machinery emerged. *Mid-20th century urban historian* Lewis Mumford described the urban transformation in industrialising countries between 1820 and 1900 as the emergence of *Coketown*, a *Paleotechnic Paradise* (Mumford, 1961). Early 20th century urban innovations in the then USSR, the US, UK, Europe, Australia and in centres across Africa and Asia were brought to life by the electrifying jolt of the new energy technologies. (Droege, 2007)

The earliest industrial application of machines helped inspire Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915) and Henry Ford's (1863-1947) innovations in the mechanisation of manufacture (Gideon, 1948). The increasingly automated production-consumption systems of the new industrial age in turn boosted power use at an exponential rate. Industrialisation and electrification greatly magnified the supremacy of cities, fanning their spread wildly. It also stirred playful imaginings amidst strong yearnings for new and technologically inspired urban form. But anti-urban utopian ideologies and popular romantic urban design ideas rose from the very outset, seeking to open a paradise away from the corrupting, dangerous influence of the core cities. The early North-American suburb evolved as one of these, and became Sydney's unattainable utopia, too. It was an escapist pastoral dream, Jeffersonian, Emersonian, *Elysian* - the very idea of a suburb connoted sentiments expressed by Henry David Thoreau in his writings on Walden Pond - on *Life in the Woods* - (Thoreau, 1854), tinged with social ideals and notions of civil disobedience, and also expressed in the mid-19th century pattern book concepts of horticulturist and architect Andrew Jackson Downing, father of New York's Central Park and a firm believer in the civilising force of simple accommodations and great public space. It was applied in America's extraordinary garden suburbs of the 19th century, such as *Riverside*, west of Chicago (1868-1870), by the famous Central Park architects and later superintendents, design partners in a number of public space and master-planned community projects, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux.

These ideas resonated well with the romantic suburbs developed in the UK, and in their splendid perfection even harked back to Baroque and Neoclassicist utopias in France, Germany and Italy. These ideas were later formalised in Sir Ebenezer Howard's (1850-1928) influential yet also highly utopian *Garden City* concepts of 1898 (Howard, 1902), the birth of the influential Garden City movement. It was in this spirit that the plan for Canberra, Australia's suburban-capital-of-the-future, was given birth to by Marion Mahoney and her husband, Walter Burley Griffin (1916), a pair of suburb designers who had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959) in the United States. Wright later reconceptualized suburban thinking for the advanced mobility age and proposed the great Modern breakthrough, *Broadacre City*, described in his 1932 work *The Disappearing City* (Wright, 1932).

The radicalisation and deconstruction of urban form was to become more and more mobility driven: General Motors' *Futurama* pavilion and ride at the 1939 'Century of Progress' World Exposition in New York, designed by Norman Geddes in a building by Albert Kahn, uncannily anticipated the 1960's car-bound urban and regional realities to come. And in order to assist in this transition industrial and government-led transport policies revolutionised urban America - and later Australia - away from rail-based modes

to technologies promoting petroleum, automobile and tyre consumption (Morris, 1980). This coincided with the massive spread of electrified suburban households under expanding power grids. The stage was set for the modern suburb as mass consumer society in built form; a vast, collective machine to live in and for.

And the modern petroleum suburb rose – and continues to rise still. Suburban matter mushrooms at and between the fringes of the world's metropolitan cores, following Doxiades' 1970s prophecy of *Ecumenopolis*, or global conurbation systems, with the precision of an oil spill, and following the rules of fractal geometry (Doxiades, 1975; Mandelbrot, 1982). While early suburban subdivisions – such as Balmain, Mosman or Paddington - blossomed as shiny and hopeful new communities along the tracks of horse-drawn and soon electric tramways, the combustion-engine powered individual vehicle created a new urban reality altogether: the new car suburbs expanding along and between motorways, extending not linearly but as a two-dimensional field. Television, radio and print promotion of the new fossil-fuel based lifestyle, in commercials and soap operas, firmly established the automobile and petrochemical-product based industrial civilisation as exclusive future to be aspired to universally. Modern suburbia is the technological legacy of the fossil fuel age, a media-promoted and mass-replicated urban formation ironically celebrating individualism. It seeped everywhere – a petroleum-based domestic paradise in need of being defended in global trade and security arrangements.

The calls for more densely concentrated and public transport-based forms of urban development since the first oil crisis of the early 1970s signalled the declining stage of the fossil-fuel economy. Urban consolidation and compact city policies now began to be promoted, shown to be more fuel-efficient; while car dependent, low-density urban structures incapable of sustaining public transport came to be understood as the major obstacle to achieving a sustainable urban life. Cultural aspects were not considered much in these argument back then. Important exceptions were studies like Kevin Lynch's 'Growing Up in Cities', comparing findings about children and young people surviving in suburban Australia with those of Argentina, Mexico and Poland. (Lynch, 1977)

In the late 1980s *New Urbanism* advocates began to offer their own critique and alternatives, decrying modern suburbia as having the cultural depth and intensity of a cow pasture. The idea of the early Garden Suburb turned out to be still alive, albeit in the rather mundane settings of commercial master-planned communities. In the US, the tradition has transformed itself from early Hadley and Northampton (Massachusetts) to pre-War Shaker Heights (Ohio), on to post-war, Modern Levittown (New York), and was genetically reconstructed into the post-modern *New Urbanist* landmarks of the 1980s and 90s, such as Seaside (Florida), Kentlands (Maryland) or Celebration (Florida), where the very idea of nonspecifically 'traditional' towns offers a new and rational home to the housing needs of the affluent.

The Australian suburb had begun as and ultimately remained a somewhat more austere setting. In the late 20th century it evolved into an egalitarian dream of entitlement to a fair go, then an affordable lifestyle, urbanity in slow motion, a village dream of live and let live, and more recently, post-modern product of aspiration-to-affluence and object of low-interest driven property speculation. As a live mass medium, as a kind of collective Big Brother House, global suburbia's variegated ancestral strands have now converged. Whatever their historical genesis, today, these orbital built-form patterns uncannily resemble one another, whether they are Californian, Dutch, Taiwanese, Japanese or

Melburnian *'burbs*. They all carry the promissory seals of salvation – of suburban form expression as empowerment.

But how can real empowerment ever come to fruition on a stage set? Can it deliver on the promise of personal actualisation, and move into an era when the age-old hope for a self-sustaining and autonomous set of communities becomes critical, and eventually, a reality?

Today, both efficiency drives and New Urbanism await a bold transformation: the emergence of a locally productive and autonomous megalopolis. But this cannot take place without managing information, movement, energy and financial flows in purposeful ways. Today's transit-oriented development, *smart growth* initiatives and attempts at recreating pre-industrial urban patterns can serve as interim measures, but more often than not they are more effective as communication devices, as symbolic expressions of larger aspirations. Some critics see them even as counterproductive, lulling planners, politicians and other people into believing that sustainable development is nigh.

The energy threats encountered in the 1970s were quaint compared to the wake-up calls we hear today, and are about to face more of. The inexorable peaking and decline of oil and natural gas as commercially available energy sources is well documented and widely accepted as reality (Campbell, 2004, 2003, 1998, 1995; Deffeyes, 2003; Goodstein, 2004; Heinberg, 2003; Klare, 2002; Roberts, 2004; Smil 2003). This, combined with emerging climate change scenarios poses a profound cultural challenge. Petroleum and nuclear power prospecting, production, refining, transportation, processing, combustion, fission and disposal chains are the world's most powerful cause of environmental destruction; of water, soil and air pollution; global warming; and fresh water depletion – be it in least-developed, developing or so-called developed nations.

Fossil fuels are also involved in what has been termed *the environmental transition* (McGranahan et al, 1999). While in least developed countries immediate health problems arise due to transmitted diseases and poor nutrition, this concern becomes alleviated in less impoverished urban centres, but then gives rise to air and water pollution, due to fossil fuel combustion. This problem, resolved in some cities of the advanced world, gave way to globally damaging levels of greenhouse gas emissions. The staggering costs to society, cities and industry range from pervasive human health damage to massive and mounting asset destruction due to catastrophic weather patterns – and, potentially conditions that could create great difficulties for Sydney in fresh water depletion, storm damage, foreshore erosion and further decline in bio-diversity and agricultural productivity. These costs will soon begin to neutralise and even surpass any economic gain generated, globally, and also here in Sydney. (Gleick, 1994, 1998; Meadows et al, 1972, 2004; Scheer, 1999; Rees and Wackernagel, 1996).

In response, the cities of Adelaide, Barcelona, Chicago, London, Munich and growing numbers of communities in Australia and here in Sydney search for and embrace new forms of community development, and strive for intensively used, well-defined, more enduring yet open cities. Regenerative power is a central part of the urban re-engineering challenge. New conceptual and practical frameworks are available: from land use to finance, regulation, demand management and distributed renewable energy technology. This search, which has its roots in the 19th century and became more and more urgent towards the end of the 20th, is about to turn into a frenzied hunt for survivable paths. One

development axiom is clearly emerging: there can be no sustainable development while fossil and nuclear power sources prevail.

IV Models of regional autonomy as post-suburban future

The phenomenon of *the disappearing city* has been observed since the early 20th century – as technology-induced entropy – but immediately inspired structural ideas on how to cope and respond (Wright, 1932). The suburban challenge is particularly manifest in Sydney: to reconcile **decentralising forces** - sail - rail – road – electric grid and telephone lines – distributed power and wireless communications, ‘cheap’ oil, global monetary flows and trade arrangements, with **centralising forces**: ecological efficiency, environmental economics, global warming – both measures of climate change mitigation (carbon cost) and adaptation (cost of construction).

Strategies to replicate traditional, urbanising attractions in the suburban field are both promising and necessary. We have seen that global urbanisation is a by-product of the fossil fuel economy, marked by low power costs for urban infrastructure: telecommunications, freight and transport systems. These modern infrastructures have linked cities globally while bypassing their regions locally. But ‘globalised’ urban systems are more vulnerable to the unfolding carbon crisis than those that rely more on their local and regional human and land resources.

The culturally grounded, community-based deployment of renewable energy technologies on an urban scale has the potential of bringing about a contemporary form of what I have termed *differentiated globalisation*, broadly distinguishing between local supplies of food and elementary goods, and the comparably more global, footloose trade in high-value products and financial and other advanced services. A rise in regional economies in support of urban centres would result, based on regional resources such as productive land for local food, bio- and wind energy production. The reconnection of cities with regional economies is beginning to be observed, in Swedish and British *ecocycling* programs – and in the rise of *energy farming*, such as Melbourne’s early investment in regional wind power, Germany’s agricultural renaissance based on bio-fuel markets, Copenhagen’s offshore wind energy production, and, in a sense, New South Wales’ early carbon-trade geared afforestation experiments, attracting carbon financing by Tokyo’s Electric Power Company.

These trends bring back older principles of authentic regional economies, revitalising agriculture and forestry. Cities around the world make concrete links between their local resource needs and the regional assets capable of meeting that need, while growing new industries and employment opportunities. The pioneers among these communities, such as Palermo, Italy; Freiburg, Germany; or Sacramento, California – see the benefits of municipally managed control over power and resources (Droege, 2007).

And regional, energy and environmental services-based monetary valuations – so-called regional or community currency tied to the value of electricity produced by renewable energy, or of providing a stable value reference for traditional money itself in this way – are being considered around the world again; related to ideas advanced by ecology and energy pioneer, the late Howard Odum (1924-2002) (Odum, 1971) and Sydney

economist and entrepreneurial intellect, Shann Turnbull since the 1970s (Turnbull, 1977; Turnbull 1992).

New institutions have emerged to meet a pressing need: in the United Kingdom, community focused, low-cost regeneration institutions like SEA/RENUE advance social equity and community empowerment by eliminating fuel poverty and building models of urban sustainability that strengthen local lives. They show exceptional results in the community development services rendered to the London Boroughs of Southwark, Merton and Wandsworth. As of August 2005 this charity reported some thirty-three local and international public and private partnerships, participated in the expanding *Solar for London* program; built both a local biogas plant and a biodiesel factory for transport fuel; developed urban wind power projects; had just received a £6m grant from the European Union and United Kingdom governments to develop a combined renewable energy and efficiency project; and been designated an *Energy Action Area* by London mayor Ken Livingstone, in the service of advancing local regeneration, community development, employment and prosperity.

There is much to be optimistic about. Locally productive geographies and resources have become important again: there is a strengthening awareness of physical conditions and their cultural meanings: the local climate, watercourses, vegetation, soil conditions, topography, land use practices, energy generation – and a discussion about economic, financial and resource policies. Because of these positive signals, the transformation away from unchecked globalisation policies to focusing more on local resources and inventiveness will require significantly less effort than most sceptics of change believe. This resurrection of the local will open new dimensions, and is already reflected in a still marginal yet rising, worldwide call for local and regional economic autonomy.

V Conclusion: nurturing tokens policy responses into seeds of change

A number of important suburban innovations have arisen across greater Sydney in the past decade. They collectively carry great seeds of positive change. These innovations have been accomplished with the ten ingredients that Ed Blakely observed, when taking Australian development leaders to the United States this year: vision; philosophy; strategy; community building; broadly achievable, rather than narrowly affordable housing; infrastructure as change catalyst and magnet; accessibility and transportability; town centres have to be real markets; architecture: the importance of design; and innovation over imitation. (Blakely, 2005)

These range from the *Restoring the Waters* program (Clear Paddock Creek, Fairfield City Council 1996-7) informing Greening Western Sydney and the Western Sydney Parklands 2004; to the opening of the regional, culturally focused Casula Powerhouse Museum in Liverpool (1998); to the water- and energy-sensitive Kogarah Town Centre (1998); Newbury Estate at Stanhope Gardens (1999-2005); Prince Henry Hospital redevelopment (2000-2005); Parramatta centre and area projects: Riverside Walk (1997-99); Greenpeace's landmark Olympic Village competition entry (1992); Sydney Olympic Park Authority's Olympic Park improvements (2000-2006); Growth Centre Policy and water management licensing (ability to bypass Sydney Water - 2005); and last not least, the Cabramatta Place Management Program (1997-2005; Noble, 2000).

Some may regard these initiatives as only token responses in the face of a dire need to change the direction of urban development, but these have to be regarded as vanguards of change. Only through focused application of bold policy commitments can lessons be learned, and the conditions be nurtured to transcend the culturally and environmentally impoverished conditions of the 20th century's suburban realm, embracing a richer, opportunity-rich and broadly sustainable post-suburban reality in which local energy and water autonomy is understood to be intrinsically linked to authentic forms of community actualisation and empowerment.

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